

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia
May 30, 2016

The President. Good morning.

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. Secretary Carter, General Dunford, Mr. Hallinan, Major General Becker, members of our Armed Forces, veterans, and most of all, our Gold Star families: I'm honored to be with you once again as we pay our respects, as Americans, to those who gave their lives for us all.

Here at Arlington, the deafening sounds of combat have given way to the silence of these sacred hills. The chaos and confusion of battle has yielded to perfect, precise rows of peace. The Americans who rest here and their families—the best of us, those from whom we asked everything—ask of us today only one thing in return: that we remember them.

If you look closely at the white markers that grace these hills, one thing you'll notice is that so many of the years—dates of birth and dates of death—are so close together. They belong to young Americans, those who never lived to be honored as veterans for their service: men who battled their own brothers in Civil War, those who fought as a band of brothers an ocean away, and men and women who redefine heroism for a new generation. There are generals buried beside privates they led. Americans known as dad or mom, some only known to God. As Mr. Hallinan, a marine who then watched over these grounds, has said, "Everyone here is someone's hero."

Those who rest beneath this silence—not only here at Arlington, but at veterans' cemeteries across our country and around the world and all who still remain missing—they didn't speak the loudest about their patriotism. They let their actions do that. Whether they stood up in times of war, signed up in times of peace, or were called up by a draft board, they embodied the best of America.

As Commander in Chief, I have no greater responsibility than leading our men and women in uniform; I have no more solemn obligation sending them into harm's way. I think about this every time I approve an operation as President; every time, as a husband and father, that I sign a condolence letter; every time Michelle and I sit at the bedside of a wounded warrior or grieve and hug members of a Gold Star Family.

Less than 1 percent of our Nation wears the uniform, and so few Americans see this patriotism with their own eyes or know someone who exemplifies it. But every day, there are American families who pray for the sound of a familiar voice when the phone rings, for the sound of a loved one's letter or e-mail arriving. More than 1 million times in our history, it didn't come. And instead, a car pulled up to the house. And there was a knock on the front door. And the sounds of "Taps" floated through a cemetery's trees.

For us, the living—those of us who still have a voice—it is our responsibility, our obligation, to fill that silence with our love and our support and our gratitude, and not just with our words, but with our actions. For truly remembering and truly honoring these fallen Americans means being there for their parents and their spouses and their children, like the

boys and girls here today, wearing red shirts and bearing photos of the fallen. Your moms and dads would be so proud of you. And we are too.

Truly remembering means that after our fallen heroes gave everything to get their battle buddies home, we have to make sure our veterans get everything that they have earned, from good health care to a good job. And we have to do better; our work is never done. We have to be there not only when we need them, but when they need us.

Thirty days before he would be laid to rest a short walk from here, President Kennedy told us that a nation reveals itself not only by the people it produces, but by those it remembers. Not everyone will serve. Not everyone will visit this national sanctuary. But we remember our best in every corner of our country from which they came. We remember them by teaching our children at schools with fallen heroes' names, like Dorie Miller Elementary in San Antonio. Or being good neighbors in communities named after great generals, like McPherson, Kansas. Or when we walk down First Sergeant Bobby Mendez Way in Brooklyn or drive across the Hoover Dam on a bridge that bears Pat Tillman's name.

We reveal ourselves in our words and deeds, but also by the simple act of listening. My fellow Americans, today and every day, listen to the stories these Gold Star families and veterans have to tell. Ask about who he or she was, why they volunteered. Hear from those who loved them about what their smile looked like and their laugh sounded like and the dreams they had for their lives.

Since we gathered here 1 year ago, more than 20 brave Americans have given their lives for the security of our people in Afghanistan. And we pray for them all and for their families. In Iraq, in our fight against ISIL, three Americans have given their lives in combat on our behalf. And today I ask you to remember their stories as well.

Charles Keating IV—Charlie or Chuck or "C-4"—was born into a family of veterans, All-American athletes, and Olympians, even a Gold Medalist. So, naturally, Charlie, and the love of his life, Brooke, celebrated their anniversary on the Fourth of July. She called him the "huge goofball" everybody wanted to be friends with: the adventurer who surfed and spearfished and planned to sail around the world.

When the Twin Towers fell, he was in high school, and he decided to enlist; joined the SEALs because, he told his friends, it was the hardest thing to do. He deployed to Afghanistan and three times to Iraq, earning a Bronze Star for valor. And earlier this month, while assisting local forces in Iraq who had come under attack, he gave his life.

A few days later, one of his platoon mates sent Charlie's parents a letter from Iraq. "Please tell everyone Chuck saved a lot of lives today," it said. He left us "with that big signature smile on his handsome face, as always. Chuck was full of aloha, but was also a ferocious warrior." Today we honor Chief Special Warfare Officer Charles Keating IV.

Louis Cardin was the sixth of seven children, a Californian with an infectious wit who always had a joke at the ready to help someone get through a tough time. When his siblings ran around the house as kids, his mom Pat would yell after them: "Watch that baby's safety margin!" And today, she realizes that what she was really doing was raising a marine. As a teenager, he proudly signed up. Louie graduated high school on a Friday. Three days later, on Monday morning, the marines came to pick him up. That was 10 years ago. One morning this March, a marine knocked on his mother's door again. On his fifth tour, at a fire base in Iraq, Louie gave his life while protecting the marines under his command.

Putting others before himself was what Louie did best. He chose to live in the barracks with his buddies even when he could have taken a house off base. He volunteered to babysit for friends who needed a date night. He'd just earned a promotion to mentor his fellow marines. When they brought Louie home, hundreds of strangers lined freeway overpasses and the streets of Southern California to salute him. And today we salute Staff Sergeant Louie Cardin.

Joshua Wheeler's sister says he was "exactly what was right about this world. He came from nothing and he really made something of himself." As a kid, Josh was the one who made sure his brother and four half-sisters were dressed and fed and off to school. When there wasn't food in the cupboard, he grabbed his hunting rifle and came back with a deer for dinner. When his country needed him, he enlisted in the Army at age 19.

He deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan 14 times, earned 11 Bronze Stars, four for valor. Last October, as ISIL terrorists prepared to execute 70 hostages, Josh and his fellow Special Ops went in and rescued them. Every single one walked free. "We were already dead," one of the hostages said, "then God sent us a force from the sky." That force was the U.S. Army, including Josh Wheeler.

Josh was the doting dad who wrote notes to his kids in the stacks of books he read. Flying home last summer to be with his wife Ashley who was about to give birth, he scribbled one note in the novel he was reading, just to tell his unborn son he was on his way. Ashley Wheeler is with us here today, holding their 10-month-old son David. Ashley says Josh's memory makes her think about how can she be a better citizen. And she hopes it's what other people think about too. Today, this husband and father rests here, in Arlington, in Section 60. And as Americans, we resolve to be better—better people, better citizens—because of Master Sergeant Joshua Wheeler.

A nation reveals itself not only by the people it produces, but by those it remembers. We do so not just by hoisting a flag, but by lifting up our neighbors. Not just by pausing in silence, but by practicing in our own lives the ideals of opportunity and liberty and equality that they fought for. We can serve others and contribute to the causes they believed in and, above all, keep their stories alive so that one day, when he grows up and thinks of his dad, an American like David Wheeler can tell them, as well, the stories of the lives that others gave for all of us.

We are so proud of them. We are so grateful for their sacrifice. We are so thankful to those families of the fallen. May God bless our fallen and their families. May He bless all of you. And may He forever bless these United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:31 a.m. in Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., USMC; Patrick K. Hallinan, Superintendent, Arlington National Cemetery; Maj. Gen. Bradley A. Becker, USA, commanding general, National Capital Region and Military District of Washington; Brooke Clark, fiancée, and Charles H. Keating III and Krista Joseph, parents, of Charles Keating IV, USN, who was killed outside Tel Askuf, Iraq, on May 3; and Rachel, Scotty, and Heather Quackenbush, Tatira Wade, and Zack Wheeler, siblings, and Matthew, Zachariah, and Joshua Wheeler, Jr., sons, of Master Sgt. Joshua L. Wheeler, USA, who was killed in Kirkuk Province, Iraq on October 22, 2015. He also referred to Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony in Arlington, VA.

Locations: Arlington, VA.

Names: Becker, Bradley A.; Cardin, Mary Pat; Carter, Ashton B.; Clark, Brooke; Dunford, Joseph F., Jr.; Hallinan, Patrick K.; Joseph, Krista; Keating, Charles, H. III; Obama, Michelle; Quackenbush, Heather; Quackenbush, Rachel; Quackenbush, Scotty; Wade, Tatira; Wheeler, Ashley; Wheeler, David; Wheeler, Joshua, Jr.; Wheeler, Matthew; Wheeler, Zachariah; Wheeler, Zack.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Holidays and special observances : Memorial Day; Iraq : Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) terrorist organization; Virginia : Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington; Virginia : President's visits.

DCPD Number: DCPD201600361.